



Release and reintegration of child soldiers: One part of a bigger puzzle

Paper presented by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers at the International Interdisciplinary Conference on Rehabilitation and Reintegration of War-Affected Children¹

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1. SUMMARY

The paper outlines key developments in international efforts to end the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict and highlights some of the challenges involved in the release and reintegration of children associated with armed forces and groups.

It notes that, despite significant attention to the issue, the phenomenon of child soldiering remains widespread. While non-state armed groups account for the majority of children recruited today, there remain a number of governments that persist in illegally recruiting and using children directly in national armed forces or indirectly via government-backed militias and armed groups.

International engagement has, however, contributed to tens of thousands of children leaving armies and armed groups through official disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) programs. As experience has been acquired and a greater understanding of the needs of returning children gained, best practices have been agreed. However, effective implementation of these practices remains challenging. Where hostilities are ongoing efforts to release children and prevent their recruitment and re-recruitment have met with only limited success. In some situations, particularly in Asia, programs to work for release and reintegration do not exist. Even in post-conflict situations where official DDR programs are established, many children associated with fighting forces cannot or do not access them. In the meantime, ongoing instability, lack of economic reconstruction, weak governments and the absence of legal and institutional frameworks necessary to ensure the protection of children can undermine the prospects for successful reintegration even for those who enter formal programs. In these contexts, girls, particularly girl mothers and their children, are among those likely to fare particularly badly and who often face stigmatization and rejection by their families and communities.

The paper argues that, while DDR programs and funding for them are generally short-term, successful reintegration is a long-term exercise which needs to be linked to longer-term recovery and reconstruction programs. The root causes of recruitment in each given context must also be addressed and a greater emphasis placed on prevention in order to break cycles of recruitment and re-recruitment. This requires not only a focus on the individual child and his or her specific needs, but should also encompass a broader approach that works towards changing the environment to which children are being returned such that the full spectrum of their rights are respected and protected and durable barriers to recruitment are erected.

¹ www.rrwac.be.

2. OVERVIEW OF CHILDREN'S INVOLVEMENT IN ARMED CONFLICT

Since the early 1990s, when the issue of child soldiers first became a feature of international human rights, humanitarian, peace and security agendas, significant measures aimed at ending children's involvement in armed conflict have been taken. A framework of international law and policy to protect children from military exploitation has been established; close to two thirds of states are parties to the core human rights treaty prohibiting children's involvement in armed conflict;² and some 80 states have set 18 as the minimum age at which an individual can enter their armed forces including for training.

Progress can also be measured by the level of attention the issue now receives from key international bodies, not least the UN Security Council. A greater level of scrutiny of grave abuses against children in situations of armed conflict, including their recruitment and use as child soldiers, has been achieved through the establishment of the UN-led monitoring and reporting mechanism. This in turn, better informs the actions of the Security Council and others.

In the realm of criminal justice, an important milestone was reached with successful prosecutions by the Special Court for Sierra Leone in 2007 and the commencement of trials in 2009 by the International Criminal Court of individuals on war crime charges relating to the conscription, enlistment and active participation in hostilities of children under 15 years old.

In the meantime, tens of thousands of child soldiers have been released from armies and armed groups as long-running conflicts have ended in countries including Burundi, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Elsewhere, for example in Nepal and Sri Lanka, large-scale recruitment of children effectively ceased with the end of hostilities, although the question of the release and reintegration of those already recruited has yet to be fully resolved in both countries.

In situations where armed conflict is ongoing, efforts to release children have also yielded results. Action plans to end recruitment of children have been agreed between the UN and parties to armed conflicts in Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Sudan and Uganda. Negotiations are ongoing with parties elsewhere including in the Central African Republic, Darfur, Myanmar and the Philippines. In Myanmar, three ethnic armed groups, to which access by the UN is prohibited by the Myanmar government, have unilaterally declared their commitment to prevent under-18s from joining their ranks.³

While the general direction is positive, if the measure for progress is a reduction in the number of children currently exposed to military exploitation or at risk from it – which is ultimately the only real measure of impact – the results remain inadequate.

In its latest Child Soldiers Global Report, the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers (the Coalition) found that between April 2004 and October 2007 children were actively involved in armed conflicts in 19 countries or territories;⁴ nine governments had deployed children into situations of armed conflict in their armed forces during that period; and some 14 governments recruited, or permitted the recruitment, of under 18's into auxiliary forces, civilian defence groups or into militias

² As of September 2009, there were 128 State Parties to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

³ Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Army; Karenni National Progressive Party/Karenni Army; and Chin National Front/Chin National Army.

⁴ Since the publication of the Global Report several conflicts have ended. Children are currently believed to be actively involved in hostilities in some 14 countries or territories worldwide.

or armed groups acting as proxies for armed forces. Dozens of armed groups in at least 24 countries had recruited, and in many cases used in hostilities, boys and girls under the age of 18.⁵

Although it is impossible to put an accurate figure on the number of affected children it is apparent that wherever armed conflict exists children are involved. In other words, international and national attention and action has not yet significantly changed the reality for many tens of thousands of children who find themselves fighting adult wars.

The majority of these children are associated with armed groups. Of the 56 parties in 15 different situations⁶ named in the annexes to the 2008 report of the UN Secretary-General on children and armed conflict, the majority are non-state armed groups.⁷ The issue of armed groups, which in many cases are proving resistant to current approaches to change their recruitment practices (appeals, engagement in dialogue, ‘naming and shaming’, threats of prosecutions or targeted measures etc.), represents among the greatest challenges to securing further progress in ending child soldiering.

However, the record of some governments is also not much improved. Although the number of governments that openly deploy under-18s directly in hostilities is relatively few, a significant number are complicit in allowing children to be used by government-related paramilitaries, militias, and civilian defence organizations or through their illicit support to armed opposition groups. It is notable that government armed forces still represent nine of the parties that recruit and use children in contravention of international norms listed in the Secretary-General’s report. Moreover, at least ten armed groups that feature on the list currently, or have in the past, received the backing of governments.⁸

The Secretary-General’s list does not however represent the full picture. There are additionally a number of parties to armed conflict that are known to recruit and use children but which have, by and large, avoided international scrutiny for these abuses. These include armed groups in India’s Chhattisgarh state (Maoists/Naxalites), Pakistan (Taliban) and Thailand (National Revolutionary Front-Coordinate, BRN-C). It also includes state security forces, state-backed paramilitaries or civilian defence groups such as in India (anti-Maoist vigilante groups/Salwa Judum and auxiliary police)⁹ and the Philippines (Citizen’s Armed Force Geographical Units and Civilian Volunteer Organizations).¹⁰

Children associated with these and other fighting forces include both boys and girls. In some cases they will be very young – in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), for example, the Coalition has recent testimony from a girl who claimed to have been first recruited by an armed group at the age of seven. In Myanmar there are verified cases of 11 year olds being recruited into the state armed forces.¹¹ In the Central African Republic, the age breakdown of 450 children released in 2007 by the

⁵ COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS, *Child Soldiers Global Report 2008*.

⁶ Afghanistan, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Myanmar, Nepal, Philippines, Somalia, Sri Lanka, southern Sudan, Darfur and Uganda.

⁷ *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/63/785-S/2009/158, 26 March 2009.

⁸ *Children and armed conflict: Report of the Secretary-General*, UN Doc. A/63/785-S/2009/158, 26 March 2009.

⁹ HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, *Dangerous Duty: Children and the Chhattisgarh Conflict*, September 2008.

¹⁰ *Consideration of Reports Submitted by State Parties under Article 8(1) of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, Initial report of the Philippines*, UN Doc. CRC/C/OPAC/PHL/1, 7 November 2007.

¹¹ *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Myanmar*, UN Doc. S/2009/278, 1 June 2009.

armed opposition group, the Union of Democratic Forces (UFDR) was 75 per cent between the ages of 13 and 17 while some 10 per cent were between 10 and 13 years old.¹²

These and other children associated with fighting forces elsewhere will typically be employed in a variety of roles from combatants, to cooks, porters and spies and for sexual purposes. In recent years we have seen children increasingly used as suicide bombers, notably in Afghanistan, Iraq and Pakistan. Palestinian children, while not formally recruited, are reported to have been used as human shields by the Israel Defense Forces in military operations against Hamas in early 2009 – a practice that is not only in contravention of international law, but also of a 2005 Israeli High Court ruling on the illegality of the use of human shields.¹³

3. DDR DEVELOPMENTS AND CONCERNS

A number of major DDR programs for children have drawn to a close in recent years including in Afghanistan, Angola, Burundi, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Tens of thousands of children have been released through such programs. Many thousands more have made their own way home. Currently efforts are continuing to separate children from fighting forces and to support their reintegration in conflict-affected countries including the Central African Republic, Chad, Colombia, the DRC, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Sudan.

From these and other experiences, a wealth of knowledge has been built on the identity of girls and boys in fighting forces, and their needs and priorities when returning to civilian life. The Paris Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles) encapsulate much that has been learned and provide guidance to policy makers, practitioners and donors in the design and implementation of effective strategies and interventions to protect children from involvement in armed conflict and to secure the release and reintegration of those that find themselves caught up in it. However, implementing best practice remains a significant challenge and in many situations provision for release and reintegration of child soldiers is still inadequate or non-existent.

3.1 Releasing children in situations of armed conflict – prevention better than cure

A fundamental principle of children's DDR is that their release and reintegration should not depend on any formal peace process or be contingent on the establishment of formal DDR programs, but rather should be prioritized at all times including where hostilities are ongoing. This is not only a question of policy, but a legal obligation on State Parties to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of children in armed conflict (Optional Protocol).¹⁴

In reality child soldiers are released from armed forces or armed groups in significant numbers only when hostilities cease or conflict ends. While efforts to demobilize children in the midst of hostilities should be actively pursued wherever possible, the constraints are formidable, results often limited and successes short-lived.

¹² *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict*: UN Doc. A/62/609-S/2007/757, December 2007.

¹³ *Human Rights Situation in Palestine and Other Occupied Arab Territories*, Human Rights Council, Tenth Session, UN Doc. A/HRC/10/22, 20 March 2009.

¹⁴ *Optional Protocol*, Article 6(3) requires State Parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that children illegally recruited or used in hostilities are demobilized or otherwise released and receive appropriate support for their reintegration.

In Sri Lanka, for example, the continued efforts since the late 1990s to bring an end to recruitment and use of underage fighters by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) resulted in a series of commitments by the LTTE and led to the release of hundreds of children over the years and at times falling rates of child recruitment.

However, as of the end of January 2009, there were over 1,400 children or persons recruited as children recorded to have been in the LTTE ranks – due to underreporting it is likely that the actual figure was significantly higher.¹⁵ During the final months of the conflict between January and May 2009, there was a renewed and massive wave of forced recruitment of children by the LTTE. The new recruits received minimal training and many are believed to have been among the thousands of casualties in the final weeks of the war.

Likewise in the DRC, military imperatives have repeatedly trumped commitments to end recruitment and release children. Large-scale releases of under-18s from government armed forces and armed groups have accompanied successive peace agreements. However, each resurgence in hostilities brings with it a new wave of recruitment and re-recruitment of underage fighters. Most recently, “an explosion of child recruitment by non-state armed groups” was reported following the escalation in hostilities in the east of the country in late 2008, in which locally-based self-defence militia known as Mai Mai were said to account for the highest number of children in their ranks.¹⁶

Research by the Coalition into the persistent recruitment and re-recruitment of under-18s by Mai Mai factions in the eastern Congolese provinces of North and South Kivu reveals an entrenched cycle of enlistment of girls and boys driven by chronic insecurity in the region; notions of community self-defence; local attitudes towards childhood; belief in mystical powers possessed by children; as well as precarious socio-economic conditions resulting in, among other things, a lack of access to education and employment. This recruitment/re-recruitment cycle will ultimately be brought to an end not simply by rescuing, in some cases repeatedly, underage fighters, but also requires the environment into which girls and boys associated with Mai Mai are returned to be addressed. This in turn requires a range of interconnected political, security, socio-economic measures aimed at improving stability in the region and reconciling local ethnic divisions and other tensions in order to negate the justification for community-based self-defence militia; effective implementation of national laws in particular those protecting children; accountability for those that recruit and use under-18s; universal free access to education; and economic development that delivers meaningful opportunities for youth employment and a viable alternative to joining Mai Mai.

The example of the Mai Mai is transferable to many other situations in which the legal, policy and institutional frameworks that should provide protection are eroded by war (if indeed they ever existed) and where military priorities dominate – in effect child rights and protection are suspended for the duration of the conflict. However, the fact that armed conflict exists cannot be permitted to justify such a suspension. Rather, it makes it all the more urgent that effective barriers against recruitment and re-recruitment of children are put in place and that the State’s responsibility to protect and promote the rights of children is supported and enforced.

¹⁵ *Report of the Secretary-General on children and armed conflict in Sri Lanka*, UN Doc. S/2009/325, 25 June 2009.

¹⁶ *Combined Report of seven thematic special procedures on technical assistance to the Government of the Democratic Republic of Congo and urgent examination of the situation in the east of the country*, UN Doc. A/HRC/10/59, 5 March 2009.

3.2 Post-conflict release and reintegration – a long-term project

DDR programs, even in post conflict settings, are generally established in insecure, often highly volatile environments in which residual tensions can lead to further outbreaks of hostilities; government authority and capacities are low; rule of law, where it exists at all, is weak; economies are shattered; and communities fragmented. DDR programs cannot resolve these problems but must contend with them and be seen as part of a broader integrated approach to reconstruction – political, economic and social – without which the prospects for sustainable reintegration of former members of armed forces and armed groups, children and adults alike, are poor.

The Paris Principles describe child reintegration as “... *the process through which children transition into civil society and enter meaningful roles and identities as civilians who are accepted by their families and communities in a context of local and national reconciliation.*” According to the Principles sustainable reintegration is achieved “... *when the political, legal, economic and social conditions needed for children to maintain life, livelihood and dignity have been secured. This process aims to ensure that children can access their rights, including formal and non-formal education, family unity, dignified livelihoods and safety from harm.*”¹⁷

By definition, achieving this goal is a long-term exercise that must be closely coordinated with and linked to other peace-building, reconstruction and reconciliation processes. The rights of former child soldiers, or indeed any child, cannot be fully realized in a context characterized by on-going insecurity, poverty, discrimination and injustice.

The UN’s Integrated DDR Standards recommends that child reintegration should extend over a period of five years or more in order to give children a viable long-term alternative to military life.¹⁸ Typically though, funding for national DDR programs has been provided only for the immediate post-conflict demobilization and reinsertion into communities – normally a one year period. The longer-term support necessary to enable former child soldiers (and other ex-combatants) to take on meaningful productive roles in their societies is rarely available.

While longer-term funding is called for, in conflict-damaged countries rehabilitation and reintegration needs of conflicted-affected children will inevitably continue beyond the life-span of and funding windows available for, even the best designed and well funded DDR programs. DDR processes should therefore also be conceived as linked to longer-term recovery and development programs. This requires institutional mechanisms to create a linkage between bodies (and funders) responsible for short and medium-term assistance to ex-combatants and those that provide longer-term assistance to communities and broader economic development.¹⁹

The relationship between failed development, failed reintegration and the resulting exploitation of children formerly associated with armed forces or groups is all too obvious in a country like Sierra Leone where grueling conditions are experienced by an estimated 10,000 children employed in artisanal diamond mining. The miners represent some of Sierra Leone’s most vulnerable children among which are former child soldiers and other war-affected youth. According to a recent study by Harvard Law School, some of the former child soldiers working in the mines specifically attributed their situation to the failure of DDR programs, including because skills training received had not

¹⁷ *The Principles and Guidelines on Children Associated with Armed Forces or Armed Groups (Paris Principles)*, February 2007.

¹⁸ UN Integrated DDR Standards, Section 5.30: Children and DDR, Sub-section 3.4: Reintegration.

¹⁹ For further discussion of this issue see: LEONTINE SPECKER, *The R-Phase of DDR processes: An Overview of Key Lessons Learned and Practical Experiences*, Netherlands Institute of International Relations “Clingendael”, September 2008.

resulted in jobs.²⁰ More generally, the slow pace of reconstruction in Sierra Leone means there are few viable alternatives for many war-affected youth and without state regulation of the mines and measures to address the socio-economic needs of children in them, they are exposed to daily hazards to their development, health and general well-being.

Unfortunately the situation in Sierra Leone is far from unique. A recent UN technical assistance mission to Liberia found that: “*Many of the assessment mission’s interlocutors were of the view that the reintegration programme (which officially closed in April 2009 having demobilized some 101,500 former combatants) had been a “quick fix” that neither transformed the violent disposition of most of the former combatants nor provided them with sustainable livelihoods.*”²¹

While the Liberian DDR program suffered many difficulties and was considered to have been particularly poor in serving the needs of women and girls, it is also clear that there is no fast track to effective reintegration. It is also evident that the success of reintegration programs is intricately linked to achieving progress in the political, social and economic reconstruction of war torn countries.

3.3 Improving access to reintegration support

In both Liberia and Sierra Leone rates of participation of child soldiers in formal DDR processes did not match the numbers believed to be associated with armed forces or armed groups – a pattern which is repeated elsewhere. For example, in the DRC an estimated 30,000 children were officially demobilized by 2007 under the World Bank and Multi-country Demobilization Program supported projects. Approximately another 11,000 children are reported to have left the armed forces or armed groups independently.²² In November 2008, the UN reported that in the absence of a functioning national disarmament, demobilization and reintegration program children continue to withdraw from armed groups, sometimes on their own and sometimes as a result of successful advocacy and interventions by child protection partners.²³

The figures for girls are particularly poor with average levels of participation of between eight and fifteen per cent of the estimated numbers of girls associated with armed forces or groups in any given situation. In Liberia, some 2,700 girls were among 11,780 children demobilized through the formal DDR process that ended in November 2004.²⁴ Although high in comparison with other DDR programs, as many as 8,000 girls did not take part. In the DRC, only 3,000 girls, or about 15 per cent of the total girls estimated to have been involved in the conflict, were officially demobilized by May 2006 as the first national DDR program was drawing to a close.²⁵

Participation rates in official DDR programs for both boys and girls could be improved, including through better designed criteria for eligibility and more effective outreach. However, formal DDR processes are high profile processes which are not necessarily best suited to the needs of a population that in many cases chooses to keep a low profile. The design of and funding for reintegration programs must therefore also take into account the fact that a significant number of children, by choice or design, will never hold formal discharge papers but will make their own way back to their communities. The challenge of providing assistance to these and other conflict-affected children and

²⁰ THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CLINIC, HARVARD LAW SCHOOL, *Digging in the Dirt: Child Miners in Sierra Leone’s Diamond Industry*, 2009.

²¹ *Special Report of the Secretary-General on the United Missions in Liberia*, UN Doc. S/2009/2009, 10 June 2009.

²² UNICEF, *Report of the National Workshop on Children’s DDR*, Goma, 12-14 April 2007.

²³ *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation of children and armed conflict in the Democratic Republic of the Congo*, UN Doc. S/2008/693, November 2008.

²⁴ UNICEF, *Evaluation of the Disarmament and Demobilisation Programme for Children Associated with Fighting Forces in Liberia*, 2005.

²⁵ COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS, *Child Soldiers Global Report 2008*.

youth is considerable but necessary if those who need it are to benefit from rehabilitation and reintegration support.

3.4 Invisible children

The fact that many children may make their own way home should not, however, justify the absence of programs specifically designed for them. Although it is well established that children are likely to be associated with armed forces or armed groups where there is armed conflict, the conceptualization of fighting forces as primarily comprising adult male combatants continues to result in DDR programs that do not make provision, or make inadequate provision for children.

For example, the August 2005 Helsinki Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) provided for the demobilization of 3,000 adult GAM combatants. Although under-18s had been used by both GAM and the government armed forces, including as informants or guards, for logistical and support and, less frequently by GAM, as combatants, there was no provision for the release and reintegration of under-18s. In Indonesia, both the government and GAM were unwilling to acknowledge that children had been involved in the decade's long Aceh independence war and were therefore reported to have been resistant to including provisions for under-18s in DDR arrangements.

A state of denial is not uncommon, but it is one that must be challenged because it means that children do not receive protection against recruitment or assistance for their release and reintegration either during or post-conflict. The record in Asia is particularly poor. In Thailand, for example, despite a growing body of evidence that under-18s are being widely recruited by the National Revolutionary Front-Coordinate (BRN-C), an ill-defined organization believed to be leading the ethno-nationalist insurgency in the far south of the country, the Thai Government has so far refused to acknowledge, at least publicly, that the problem exists. As a result, no practical measures have been taken towards protecting children against recruitment or securing the release of those already associated with BRN-C.²⁶

Similarly in India, no official programs have been established to assist the release and reintegration of children despite well documented evidence of their involvement in internal armed conflict there.²⁷ In Myanmar, government claims that it has put in place procedures for the rehabilitation and reintegration of underage recruits in the national army cannot be verified and, in any case, the number of under-18s it claims to have released represents only a fraction of those believed to be in its armed forces. In these and other situations, the question is not about the quality of reintegration support, but rather the need to engage governments to persuade them that such measures must be taken at all.

3.5 Working with communities

Where programs for the release and reintegration of children do exist, child protection agencies such as Save the Children have consistently found that programming is most effective where inclusive of other conflict-affected children. Save, among others, has argued that this approach avoids stigmatization of children and reduces the likelihood of reprisals by parties to the armed conflict and

²⁶ See: the COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS, *Briefing Paper: Child Recruitment and Use in Southern Thailand, December 2008 & International Crisis Group, Recruiting Militants in Southern Thailand*, 22 June 2009.

²⁷ See for example; HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, *Dangerous Duty: Children and the Chhattisgarh Conflict*, September 2008.

peer or community resentment against returning children where they appear to be rewarded for their actions during conflict or provided with support that other equally vulnerable children cannot access.²⁸

The Coalition's own work and that of others also highlights the need to consider the family and community context to which children are returning. This can be particularly pertinent in relation to girls. Escape from entrenched gender discrimination and violence, including rape and other forms of sexual violence within the home or broader community, can be a motive for joining fighting forces. While protecting them from military exploitation, simply reinserting girls (or indeed any other child) back into a potentially abusive environment exposes them to other, in some cases, equally serious risks.

The risks can be further exacerbated by community attitudes to returning girl soldiers who are consistently among those likely to experience particular difficulties in successfully reintegrating. The Coalition's research on Mai Mai, for example, indicates that while returning boys are generally treated by their communities as "heroes", returning girls are treated with suspicion because they are perceived to have been sexually promiscuous while with the Mai Mai.²⁹ Preliminary research in Nepal suggests a similar phenomenon in which girls formerly associated with the Maoists have faced stigmatization in some rural communities, and there are reports that some may now be working in dance bars, massage parlors or performing other forms of sex work in order to make a living.

Girl mothers and their children are among the most vulnerable groups with studies showing that they often face community judgment, stigmatization and social distancing on their return from fighting forces – especially when their "bush husbands" continue to be part of their lives. Understanding and responding to the complex reasons for parental and community rejection of these girls and the potentially unique set of needs of their children who are often conceived as a result of rape, is clearly a necessary part of achieving their successful reintegration. It is not surprising therefore that studies indicate that girl mothers require gender-specific interventions coupled with longer reintegration periods and consistent follow-up.³⁰

It is also increasingly apparent that mobilization and preparation of communities is a key component of reintegration, in particular although not exclusively for more vulnerable categories of returnees such as girl mothers. Indeed, building or rebuilding familial and community relationships, sometimes referred to as the "soft side" of DDR may in some cases be as important as providing direct support to individual returnees.

Research into community attitudes towards returnees in several countries shows them to be complex and subject to change over time. A wide range of different factors can influence the response of a community to returnees. Among these factors can be the profile of the individual child – members of communities in northern and eastern Uganda, from which children had been forcibly recruited by the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), interviewed by the Coalition in 2008, singled out orphans, child mothers with babies born in the LRA, and children with physical injuries as those for whom acceptance was more difficult. The extent to which returning children contribute economically can also be a factor – in conditions of poverty and where basic services are lacking returnees can be perceived as an unwelcome burden, particularly if they suffer injuries or other conditions that

²⁸ SAVE THE CHILDREN, *Stolen Futures: The reintegration of children affected by armed conflict. Submission to the ten-year review of the 1996 Machel study on the impact of armed conflict on children*, 2007.

²⁹ Forthcoming report by the Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers.

³⁰ SUSAN MCKAY, MALIA ROBINSON, MARIA GONSALVES & MIRANDA WORTHEN, *Girls Formerly Associated with Fighting Forces and Their Children: Returned and Neglected* (2006) available at: <http://www.child-soldiers.org/psycho-social/english> & *Returning Home: Children's perspectives on reintegration: A case study of children abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army in Teso, eastern Uganda*, unpublished paper by the COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS, February 2008.

prevent them from carrying out domestic or wage earning work. Perceptions that returnees have violated community norms is also frequently an obstacle to the reintegration of girls who have, or are perceived to have, been involved in sexual relations albeit often forced while members of fighting forces.

Some studies also indicate negativity and hostility by communities to returnee children is influenced by their real or presumed role as perpetrators of human rights abuses and other forms of violence. International principles state that children who commit crimes while associated with armed forces or groups should be treated primarily as victims. However, convincing receiving communities (which in some cases will have been victims of the alleged crimes) that this should be the case is not always possible. A study by War Child in north Equateur in eastern DRC, for example, found that communities did not regard returning children as victims of war but rather as perpetrators of violence who were considered dangerous and represented a threat to the community.³¹ Community consultations carried out by the Coalition in northern Uganda similarly found high levels of mistrust of underage LRA returnees who were considered as negative influences on other children in the community and capable of violence.³²

Such findings suggest that overcoming community resistance to reintegrating returning child soldiers requires the question of accountability and reconciliation to be confronted. Careful consideration as to how transitional justice processes might enhance reintegration prospects for child soldiers is needed while factoring in to the debate the rights of victims of human rights abuses to justice and reparations.

4. CONCLUSION

Release and reintegration of children is clearly not a stand-alone activity, but is intricately connected to a wide range of other factors – conflict dynamics, economic development, legal reform, institution building etc – all of which contribute to influencing the extent to which effective reintegration is achieved. Nor is reintegration a short-term activity. While returning a child to their community may be achieved relatively swiftly, their acceptance by that community and their ability to take on a meaningful role in it (both of which may also be connected) is a longer process.

The connections between release and reintegration on the one hand and the broader security, political and economic environment on the other must be factored into the design of DDR programs. While DDR programs cannot be expected to resolve all the problems that returning children are likely to face, many of them can be anticipated and linkages made between the shorter term release and reintegration activities and longer-term measures aimed at addressing systemic problems that prevent children from enjoying their basic human rights and make them vulnerable to military exploitation and other human rights abuses. Addressing the broader environment is not only essential to successful long-term reintegration, but also for preventing future recruitment and re-recruitment in situations where hostilities are continuing.

While achieving the release and reintegration of children should remain a priority, the importance of prevention cannot be overstated. It is clear from the examples of Sri Lanka, the DRC and elsewhere that there are considerable obstacles to securing release in the midst of hostilities. It is also commonplace for children to be re-recruited once released. Given that prevention rather than rescue ultimately represents the best protection for children against harm, greater attention and resources to this long-term work are required.

³¹ WAR CHILD, *Don't Tell Us Where We Belong*, October/November 2005.

³² Unpublished survey by the COALITION TO STOP THE USE OF CHILD SOLDIERS, *Uganda: An Uncertain Welcome. Summary of discussions with communities and children on the situation of abducted children returning from the Lord's Resistance Army*, March 2009.